

# Old Stone House

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Old Stone House  
A unit of Rock Creek Park



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In the midst of Washington, D.C., a city of grand memorials to national leaders and significant events, stands an unassuming building commemorating the daily lives of middle class colonial Americans. Dating from 1765, Old Stone House is the oldest structure on its original foundation in the national capital. Step inside the doors of Old Stone House. Listen and learn its unique stories and discover what they mean to you.

### George Washington’s Headquarters?

Since the days when Great Britain ruled the colony of Maryland, Old Stone House has withstood the forces of development and commercial growth that made Georgetown one of the nation’s busiest ports by around 1800. Ironically, local folklore is responsible for saving this historical landmark from destruction.

In 1791, when President George Washington and Pierre Charles L’Enfant arrived to carve out the federal district from the surrounding “wilderness”, they stayed at the Fountain Inn, operated by John Suter and his family. Commonly called Suter’s Tavern, the inn was where the president held negotiations with local landowners.

Suter’s son, John Suter, Jr., would operate a clock shop in Old Stone House around 1810.

Long after Washington’s death, the connection with the Suter family became intertwined with the house’s history, and the legend was born that the house served as headquarters for both Washington and L’Enfant. The mythical association of the house with America’s first president and the man who helped design the capital saved the house from the fate of other structures of its era. Today, it is believed that Suter’s Tavern was located elsewhere in Georgetown, most likely at the corner of what is now 31st and K Streets NW.

### Simple and Efficient: Early Days at Old Stone House

Although few detailed records survive from the families who owned the Old Stone House, we can learn much about their lives from the architecture of the house and the personal possessions listed in wills and bills of sales.

In 1764, Christopher and Rachael Layman traveled from Pennsylvania with their two sons to begin a new life in the growing port of Georgetown along the Potomac River. For one pound, ten shillings, they bought Lot Three, a property facing Bridge Street (now named M Street NW).

The Layman’s financed the construction of this one-room house and used local blue fieldstone, quarried about two miles upriver, and solid oak boards, hewn with a pit saw. The backbreaking labor and skills of the builders is evident in the well-placed

stones and evenly laid ceiling beams. The marks left by the massive saw used to cut the ceiling beams can be seen in the room that housed the Layman family (the bookstore).

The Layman’s simple house was functional: stone walls two to three feet thick and packed dirt floors protected the family from harsh weather, while low ceilings conserved heat from the hearth fire.

Outside, house residents planted herbs, vegetables, and fruit trees. A small number of milk cows, hogs, and hens produced the family’s meat, milk, cheese, eggs, and butter. A small amount of tobacco was also grown on the property. This labor intensive and land degrading crop was often farmed by African American slaves.

Female Owners and Slave Workers

The Layman’s owned the basic essentials: Christopher’s tools, a stove, a bible, and some furniture. These items were detailed in Layman’s will when he died unexpectedly. In 1767, Rachael Layman remarried and sold Old Stone House to another widow and self-sufficient woman, Mrs. Cassandra Chew.

Mrs. Chew was a member of the upper-middle class. Her wealth included other property in and around Georgetown, as well as slaves. Tax records indicate that Mrs. Chew owned six enslaved African Americans in 1800.

Mrs. Chew’s wealth enabled her to make significant additions to the house. She financed construction of the rear kitchen and second and third floors by 1775.

Upon her death in 1807, Mrs. Chew bequeathed Old Stone House to her oldest daughter, Mary Smith Brumley. Like her mother, Mrs. Brumley was financially comfortable. She was the first in a succession of propreiters who leased out the front room (today’s bookstore) for business.

An 1826 inventory of her possessions indicates that she owned 15 slaves. One of them, Tabitha, purchased freedom from Mrs. Brumley for herself and her child. Tabitha paid Mrs. Brumley 201 dollars.

By the middle of the 1800s, Georgetown’s African American population, both free and slave, made up around one third of the city’s total inhabitants. Their labor before emancipation contributed substantially to the commercial development and prosperity of the town.



At Old Stone House, African American slaves probably did most of the cooking, cleaning, and gardening. Photo courtesy of George Washington University.

Recent History of Old Stone House

Old Stone House continued to be privately owned until 1953, when the federal government purchased the property for \$90,000 in response to local residents who had come to regard the house as one of historical significance. At that time, the house accomodated offices and the Parkway Motor Company, a used car dealership whose paved lot sat in what is now the location of the English-style garden.

Before the National Park Service (NPS) opened the house to the public in 1960, significant historical preservation work was completed to get the interior of the house looking like it did before 1800. Georgetown residents donated most of the colonial furnishings that can be seen in the house

today. John Suter, Jr.’s grandfather clock, which was built in the house over two hundred years ago, was purchased by the NPS and brought back to the house.

Today, Rock Creek Park, a unit of the U.S. National Park System, administers Old Stone House as well as other Georgetown sites including Georgetown Waterfront Park, Dumbarton Oaks Park, Montrose Park, and Francis Scott Key Memorial Park.

We hope that you enjoy your visit to Old Stone House. To learn more, visit [www.nps.gov/rocr/](http://www.nps.gov/rocr/) or follow and like us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/RockCreekNPS>.

Cell Phone Tours

Learn the history of Georgetown’s national park sites. Use your cell phone at the following locations and dial (202) 730-9307. Then type in the corresponding number:

- 9. Dumbarton Oaks Park
- 10. Montrose Park
- 11. Francis Scott Key Memorial Park
- 12. Old Stone House

